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ABSTRACT

Adult ways of writing--of constructing textual visions of--children are linked to their ways of envisioning themselves and, more broadly, to their perceptions of fully "developed" adults. Thus, developmental visions have traditionally taken for granted the social and psychological worlds of privileged adults. This essay aims to make problematic such writing by reviewing new visions of language and of development that acknowledge human sociocultural and ideological complexity. Within these visions, children's differentiation of ways of using language are linked to their differentiation of their own place--potential or actual--in the social world. To more fully explore these new visions, the essay also offers a concrete illustration of writing children as social and ideologically complex beings. The essay discusses the case of "Sammy," a second grader in an urban school whose writing reflected his own struggle to figure out his place in the social world. It concludes by considering implications for both professional writing and classroom pedagogy. (Contains 119 references, and one figure and one table of data. An appendix lists the sex and ethnicity of the children in the second-grade classroom.) (Author/RS)

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National Center for the Study of Writing

Technical Report No. 71

Writing Children: Reinventing the Development of Childhood Literacy

Anne Haas Dyson

April, 1995

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Writing Children: Reinventing the Development of Childhood Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Adult ways of writing—of constructing textual visions of—children are linked to their ways of envisioning themselves and, more broadly, to their perceptions of fully "developed" adults. Thus, developmental visions have traditionally taken for granted the social and ideological worlds of privileged adults. This essay aims to make problematic such writing by reviewing new visions of language and of development that acknowledge human sociocultural and ideological complexity. Within these visions, children's differentiation of ways of using language are linked to their differentiation of their own place—potential or actual—in the social world. To more fully explore these new visions, this essay also offers a concrete illustration of writing children as social and ideologically complex beings. It concludes by considering implications for both professional writing and classroom pedagogy.

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This article began as a dialogic response to Marty Nystrand (and, more particularly, to Nystrand, Greene, and & Wiemelt [1993]), and I thank him for his encouragement of this manuscript.

Writing Children: Reinventing the Development of Childhood Literacy

Anne Haas Dyson
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> [A] new breed of developmental theory ... will be motivated by the question of how to create a new generation that can prevent the world from dissolving into chaos and destroying itself. I think its central technical concern will be how to create in the young an appreciation of the fact that many worlds are possible, that meaning and reality are created and not discovered, that negotiation is the art of constructing new meanings by which individuals can regulate their relations with each other....
>
> —Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986, p. 149)

> We have never taken fully seriously the notion that development is, in large measure, a social construction, the child a modulated and modulating component in a shifting network of influences.
>
> —William Kessen, "The American Child and Other Cultural Inventions" (1979, p. 815)

The very grammar of Bruner's opening quote suggests a remarkable change in the landscape of developmental theory over the last 20 years (Bruner & Haste, 1987). Such theory is no longer a reified or detached account of human nature, but a construction *"motivated"* by human concerns. As such, it reflects adults' cultural desires as well as childhood's biological givens: a new theory, says Bruner, will be explicitly linked to "technical"—I would say "pedagogical"—concerns.

In this essay, I take "fully seriously," to use Kessen's words, the notion that we do indeed invent—or write—children. Our visions of ourselves and of our children are inextricably linked: we label adults and children as categorical opposites and then use the concept of "development" to construct a path from the childhood of our past to the maturity we seek in our present. It is for this reason that understandings of adulthood and childhood change historically and cross-culturally (Thorne, 1987).

It is also for this reason—this motivated linking of adulthood and childhood—that visions of the "normal" developing child traditionally have carried socially hierarchical messages. As Kessen (1979, p. 818) writes, "Tolstoy said that there is no proletarian literature; there has been no proletarian child psychology either." Throughout the century, constructions of the normally developing middle-class child have been the basis for practical advice to "good" mothers (Steedman, 1992).

In stressing the differences between the adult and the child, in linking narrowly defined normality with the ethics of care, developmental visions have masked the social and cultural diversity of developmental pathways and endgoals, made invisible their own ideological commitments—and, most importantly for this essay, diverted attention from the complexity of what it means in our society to be an adult, and of what it means to be a child (Kessen, 1979; Thorne, 1987; see also Corsaro & Miller, 1992). Ours is an ever smaller world of ever increasing sociocultural diversity—a world needing, as Bruner suggests, a developed appreciation of the fragility of human life and of the possibility of re-inventing ways of living together.

In this essay I aim to contribute to this "new breed of developmental theory," a theory that will necessitate acknowledging the sociocultural and ideological complexity of ourselves and of children. Learning written language, I argue, is inextricably tied to learning to interpret—and, potentially, to reinterpret—the social world and one's place in it.

To this end, in the first major section of this essay, I discuss recent changes in conceptions of language and literacy development—and the constraints on those changes, given the conservative influence of the institution of schooling. In the second section, I use my own writing of children to explore new developmental visions, emphasizing both the interactional and the ideological dynamics of learning to write. I write about Sammy, a 7-year-old in an urban school, whose writing reflected his own struggle to figure out his place in the social world.

Finally, in a brief concluding section, I consider the connections between efforts to reconceive literacy development and efforts to reconceive young children's education in ways that will help them to read and write both words and worlds in new ways (Freire, 1970; Greene, 1988)—to, in Bruner's words, reimagine "their relations with each other." To help children in these socioculturally complex times, we must articulate that complexity in new links between developmental and pedagogical visions.

RE-POSITIONING THE OBSERVER AND THE OBSERVED IN STUDIES OF CHILD LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

> If our theorizing began with selves defined through relationships with others, retaining full awareness of social hierarchies, and if that approach were developed into a full critique of existing institutions, we might thoroughly overturn traditional knowledge.
>
> —Barrie Thorne, "Revisioning Women and Social Change: Where are the Children?" (1987, p. 104)

Recent reconsiderations of both development and literacy have indeed begun with "selves defined through relationships with others," in Thorne's words. Both theoretically and methodologically, researchers have backed up from a unit of study focused on an individual child's behavior, in the case of development, or from the written code itself, in the case of literacy, to see the

dynamic social networks and cultural contexts within which children develop and through which symbols, like language, gain their power. Envisioning these networks and contexts in others' lives has entailed acknowledging them in researchers' own lives.

This stepping back from the easily counted and codified, to the slippery, chameleon like nature of human relationships, has been energized, at least in part, by three theoretical perspectives important to my own work here. I review each below and then selectively illustrate the influence of these ideas on developmental research on children's language and literacy. My aim is not a comprehensive review of empirical research, but a positioned discussion, one that may join with others working toward a fuller writing of the diversity and complexity of childhood and of learning to compose.

Conceptual Tools for Re-envisioning Literacy Development

The first tool in my reconstruction kit is a social constructivist lens, one grounded in the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Vygotskian-inspired scholars (e.g., Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1985, 1991). Through this lens, development is not a linear transformation of mental structures, but situated changes in sociocognitive actions, in children's *ways of participating* in culturally valued activities. That is, development is mediated by—is revealed and accomplished through—socially organized and, often, language-mediated activities. The fact of change is taken for granted and not, in and of itself, interesting; what is interesting is how the "rhythms and goals" of everyday life organize and direct that change (Rogoff, 1990, p. 13).

Although a social constructivist view highlights enacted social relationships, it does not necessarily reveal the hierarchical nature of those relationships. To see this hierarchy, one needs a second tool—the poststructuralist lens of philosophers like Foucault, feminist thinkers like Scott and Kristeva, and critical pedagogists like Gilbert and Luke. Through such a lens, social relationships, as organized in family life, institutions, or even disciplines, are themselves embedded in societal fields of discourse, to use Foucault's ideas—fields, not of waves of grain, but of contested power.

Discourse is a system of categories, terms, and statements that reflect dominant ideologies or epistemologies—ideas or "truths" that are themselves interrelated with the material conditions and power (i.e., political) relationships among groups of people (Williams, 1983). Seemingly simple oppositions like adult/child, teacher/student, husband/wife, employer/worker are not just linguistic categories but assumed relationships that provide a "grid of identities" (Foucault, 1970, p. xix). When used in studying development, these fields of discourse—sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting—reveal children learning not just *how* to participate as a community member but *who* they can be in the community.

In a poststructuralist vision, the phenomenological self sometimes disappears in the discursive grid. Revealing the grid becomes most important (Foucault, 1972). Thus, the third necessary lens is Bakhtin's dialogism. Viewed through this lens, the speaking self is dynamically situated within

both an interactionally and an ideologically complex world (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986).

In Bakhtin's view, when we use language, whether oral or written, we enter into a dialogue, a relationship, with others; and we do so by adopting a social voice, a genre, which "temporarily crystallizes" the relations of a given moment within a broader cultural type (Morson, 1986, p. 89). Telling a joke, for example, involves a different kind of relationship (is a different genre) than preaching a sermon; participating in a debate is different from delivering a reprimand.

Moreover, in using language, we are not only interacting with others; we are also using others' words to represent our own meanings. As Bakhtin explained, words do not come from dictionaries; they come from "other peoples' mouths, in other people's contexts" (1981, p. 294). When we enter into those contexts as speaking subjects, we are expected to adopt certain words, or to maintain certain silences, given our social place as children or adults, students or teachers, women or men, as people of varied roles, status, and disposition. We speak with, or against, those expectations, those societal beliefs about the way the social world works (in other words, those ideologies).[1]

Thus, as Figure 1 suggests, each individual utterance—each spoken or written turn or text—is formed at the intersection of a horizontal relationship between speaker and addressee and a vertical one between the speaker's own psyche (the "inner subjective signs" or meanings for words) and the meanings available in the social world (the outer, "ideological signs" or words) (Volosinov, 1973; p. 39; see also Emerson, 1986, and Kristeva, 1986). The arrows in the figure suggest selves who move in sociocultural space, positioned in relationships with diverse others, with different aspects of their own identity foregrounded or muted, with different possibilities for speaking.

To illustrate, like other women writers I know, I routinely write *[sic]* after the word *man* in citations. However "neutral" the cited author might have regarded it, that word has a complex history in the English language (Spender, 1980). In so writing *sic*, I as an individual not only interact with readers, but I also become a "we" with others in the ideological world—I foreground gender by resisting available words. As Volosinov (1973, p, 88), a member of Bakhtin's intellectual group, explained, the more differentiated one's understanding is of the social world in which one orients oneself, the more differentiated, the more complex, one's inner meanings and, at least potentially, the outer signs with which they are linked.

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[1]I am not using the word *ideology* pejoratively to refer to a kind of "false consciousness" (Williams, 1983, p. 156). Rather, I am using it to refer to a "set of ideas" that arise from a particular historical and material circumstance (Williams, 1983, p. 156). It is this latter meaning that underlies Bakhtin's use of the term. There is no meaning outside some governing ideology. Thus, the Bakhtinian sense of *ideology* is similar to that of the poststructuralist's *discourse*.

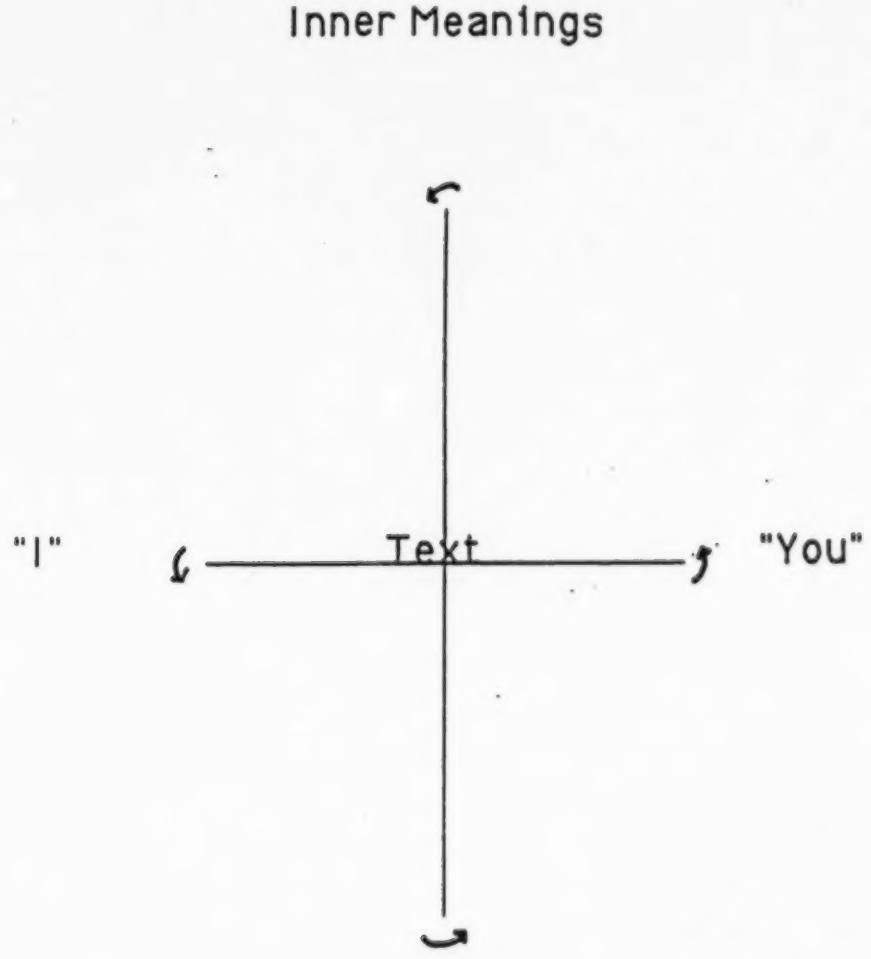

Figure 1. Composing as a dialogic process: Its horizontal and vertical dimensions.

Thus, from a dialogic view, the differentiation of a symbol system—of its parts and their systemic interrelationship—is linked to the differentiation of a social self. And, while not equating the challenges of young children and those of adult researchers, this insight is useful for understanding children's ways of writing *and* adults' ways of writing children. Researchers who discuss "literacy development" may take for granted the truth, the goodness, of the unarticulated "we-experience" (Volosinov, 1973, p. 89) that underlies their ways of writing about children. In rewriting developmental stories of childhood literacy, researchers potentially rewrite their own place in the social and ideological world.

STUDYING ENACTED RELATIONSHIPS

On Development and Oral Language

Research on language development illustrates the ways in which a methodological backing up—a consideration of units of study broader than individual children's utterances—is dialectically linked with a theoretical concern with the social and ideological positioning of the observer and the observed. An exclusive focus on the *individual* child and singular developmental paths toward purely linguistic ends was possible only if scholars kept their focus on child behaviors—not on social and cultural worlds. As Volosinov (1973, p. 89) argues, "individualism" is "a special ideological form of the 'we-experience,' [one supported by] the objective security and tenability provided by the whole social order." Repositioning both the observer and the observed—moving beyond the security of the taken-for granted—yielded alternative ways of understanding both *what* was being developed through language and, at the same time, *how* (i.e., the processes through which) such development occurred.

Tightly framed visions. In the sixties, a time of intensive study of language development, the child was pre-wired with a Language Acquisition Device (Chomsky, 1965); the developmental endgoal or *what* was a complex system of linguistic rules for linking meanings with sounds; the developmental *how* was an unconscious formulation of rules, triggered by exposure to language in use.

Thus, researchers focused tightly on spoken text, the words themselves (i.e., the upper half of the vertical axis in Figure 1, from meanings to "text"). They followed young, primarily middle-class children around their homes, taping and analyzing child utterances (e.g., Brown, 1973). They coded those utterances for basic meanings (e.g., agents, actions, objects) and arrangements (i.e., early syntax), counted them for morphemic length, and then sequenced them into predictable plots of evolving complexity—plots about, for example, children progressing from "milk," to "more milk," to "want more milk," to the nicely formed but equally demanding "I want more milk." The developmental story thus constructed features a child linguist attuned to salient parts of the language and how those parts are arranged (i.e., to

grammar). The child begins by expressing underlying meanings with one-word utterances, gradually differentiating a more powerful grammar for expressing increasingly (infinitely) complex utterances.

And yet, from the time researchers first began traipsing after "the child" with a tape recorder, their methodological unit of order—the syntactic utterance—began to deconstruct. The utterance reached beyond its constructed borders (its underlying morphemes and phrase structures) into the complexities of language in use. It was impossible to understand the child's grammatical rules without attending to a "rich interpretation" of the child's meaning and, ultimately, of context (Brown, 1973). For example, was "mommy sock" a statement about mommy's sock—or about mommy's action on somebody else's sock (Bloom, 1970)?

Moreover, the nature of mother's input was also questioned early on (Brown & Bellugi, 1964): how did the caregiver's style of interaction affect the nature, particularly the rate, of the child's language acquisition (e.g., Cross, 1977; Nelson, 1973)? Still, the outcome measure—the ultimate point—was the complexity of the child's grammar. The exchanges between mother and child were not situated dialogic encounters, but more or less successful opportunities for a child to learn language. The "best" exchanges were those in which a premium was placed on the exchange of new information, a value consistent with that of Anglo-American middle-class culture.

Wider, deeper visions. Three decades later, there are new perspectives on what it means to develop language.[2] And, as is often the case, new possibilities in researchers' conceptual tools came in part when they were studying children who did not reflect back taken-for-granted social worlds (Miller-Jones, 1988), children who were not white and/or middle-class American children. Studies of children in this country (Heath, 1983; Philips, 1983) and in other societies (Ochs, 1988; Schieffelin, 1990) revealed that the *what* of language development includes more than the evolution of arranged grammatical parts. Children are learning words as mediating devices, words that help them "regulate their own actions and those of others," to return to Bruner's words.

That is, a child doesn't just learn to say "milk," or even to request a drink (or to fulfill an instrumental function, in Halliday's [1977] terms); a child learns to enter into relationships with particular others who may or may not, in certain times and places, be responsive and get them that milk (assuming there's milk to be gotten). Children's differentiation—their attention to and organizing—of language forms is, at the same time, a differentiation of their own possibilities for participating in the social world in particular ways. (Thus, the "horizontal" or interactional dimension of language use is visible; see Figure 1.)

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[2]Certainly earlier articulated perspectives on language and literacy continue, as educators and researchers seek to better understand potential benchmarks or signs of significant progress in child grammar, for example, or orthographic control. But such perspectives are now relatively established, rather than new theoretical possibilities.

Moreover, not only are children learning to participate in a breadth of relationships, they are also learning "to be"; they are learning about the words available in certain situations to a boy or girl, to a person of a particular age, ethnicity, race, class, religion, and on and on. (Thus, the complete "vertical" or ideological dimension of language use is salient; see Figure 1.)

For example, Ochs (1988, 1992) illustrates how particular linguistic units (lexical words, syntactic structures, kinds of discourse) index or constitute certain affective stances and social activities themselves linked to social identity. When a child acquires tag sentences, for instance, the child is not only learning a kind of syntactic structure, but she or he is also learning to participate in a particular way in social situations requiring stances of uncertainty and acts of gaining confirmation ("it's cold, isn't it"); and these acts and stances are themselves associated with the establishment of social identity, particularly gender.

Those broader ideological visions influence both the evolving child utterances (part of the *what*) and the interactional support the child receives (part of the *how*). For example the Samoan mothers studied by Ochs do not "scaffold" the conversation of very young children, a style of contingent responding once assumed to be near universal (DeVilliers & DeVilliers, 1978) and now seen as "not widespread beyond the Western middle class" (Gaskins, Miller, & Corsaro, 1992, p. 9). That is, the mothers do not attempt to engage very young children as conversational partners, and their action is part of a larger ideology of appropriate adult/child relations; given a society in which children live their daily lives in close approximation to adult activities, children must learn by paying attention to others, rather than through special activities planned particularly for the young.

Researchers may pull apart analytically the linguistic, cognitive, and social aspects of language learning in their efforts to understand variation, for example, why certain syntactic structures develop later in some communities rather than others; certainly such variation may be traced primarily to linguistic or conceptual complexity, or to social opportunities for use. But, from a dialogic perspective, these aspects are inseparable in action: the language of the individual child is developing as it is shaped in the horizontal or interactional encounters of everyday life, which themselves reflect the vertical or ideological dynamics of a society.

Further, in any society, children are not passive or unthinkingly socialized into their communities. Children are always situated in historical time differently from their parents. Indeed, in the company of peers, they sometimes adopt values, attitudes, and linguistic behaviors different from those of their parents (Henze & Vanett, 1993). Thus, social allegiances and conflicts—not only internal psycholinguistic conflicts and interactional guidance—can influence the direction of learning and are part of the developmental *how* (Goodnow, 1991).

From this broader perspective, the methodological units for the study of language development include the communicative activity or event, itself

situated within a complex ideological world encompassing observer and observed. And yet, it is one matter for researchers to "back up," as it were, to see more fully themselves and others as speakers of the word and world; and quite another to do so to envision writers. Most research on child literacy does not take place in the relativistic world of developmental sociolinguists or cultural anthropologists. It takes place in the shadows of—if not the context of—schools, as I discuss below.

On Development and Literacy

Tightly framed visions. A number of scholars in the sixties and seventies explicitly included written language in the study of psychological and social issues about language itself (e.g., Goody and Watt, 1963; Basso, 1974; Philips, 1975; Scribner & Cole, 1978; Ervin-Tripp & Mitchell-Kernan, 1977; Olson, 1977). This inclusion strongly influenced the intense interest in written language development that began in the seventies (Farr, 1985).

Reflecting the prevailing psycholinguistic vision of the child, researchers examined primarily children's graphic words—or their attempts thereof. (Thus, again, the upper half of Figure 1's vertical axis is relevant.) They provided insight into the concepts and structural logic undergirding children's visual arrangements of print (Clay, 1966, 1975) and their decisions about which and how many letters to write (Chomsky, 1971; Read, 1971). Children were not necessarily followed around the home, but products were collected and, in some cases, extended observations were made (e.g., Clay's [1966] classroom observations and Ferreiro's [1978] Piagetian-influenced clinical interviews).

In the resulting developmental story, early strings of circles, curvy lines, and dots, gave way to more differentiated and alphabetic forms. Thus, the developmental outcome—the "what"—was the child's control of the written code. The how was active exploration and rule formulation, given, of course, exposure to the written system. To date, pedagogical texts urge teachers to observe the "natural stages" of child writing, by which they mean changes in encoding (Raines & Canady, 1990, p. 82; see also Temple, Nathan, Temple, & Burris, 1993).

Just as observing young children talking led to a widening of the methodological frame to include children's interactional partners, so too did observing young writers. Read (1971), for example, commented on the presence of responsive parents who were interested in and accepting of the child's efforts. In so doing, Read echoed earlier scholars (e.g., Durkin, 1966) and anticipated later ones (e.g., Bissex, 1980), and he voiced a theme that has remained a clear textual thread in the literacy development literature: in the path toward developed written language, class, race, and culture do not necessarily matter; "supportive" others do. If the what of development is neutral (i.e., knowledge undergirding the encoding of messages), and if the how is the universal linguistic and cognitive processes of the human child, then all that matters is "proper" support.

The focus on the child's interactional partners intensified with the increasing interest in the semantics and pragmatics of language. New theoretical visions grew up along side those of the active child writer, and these visions featured the active mother/teacher. For example, Ninio and Bruner (1978) examined the changing book-reading interactions between a mother and her infant (a white, English, middle-class male). The mother initially took responsibility for the book-reading routine, "scaffolding" her son by responding and building on his verbal and nonverbal behaviors and thereby helping him attend ("Look") and interact with ("What's that?" "It's an X.") the book. The child thus differentiated the relationships between spoken words and particular referents in the context of differentiating how he was to take his role in the activity of book reading. The developmental outcome—the developmental what—was social, linguistic, and, in my view, literate (i.e., involved learning how to use written artifacts in culturally appropriate ways).

The concept of "scaffolding" had an enormous influence on the study of child literacy, particularly of adults reading to children and of writing conferences. Within this research context, situated, adaptive responsiveness became an instructional procedure, and the key interactive partner became the supportive teacher/mother who, like "good mothers" in middle-class families, disappeared as the child became independent (Ochs, 1992; Steedman, 1992). Given that the interactive other was disappearing, an important developmental outcome was not a differentiated social role but an elaborated or reified text, one no longer bound to an "I" and a "you," to a relationship (Olson, 1977; for a related critique, see Brandt, 1990). For example, Snow (1983) examined her own interactions with her young son and concluded:

> It is clear ... that many of the experiences identified as contributing to preschool children's literacy development (such as, being told stories, being read to, receiving help in constructing descriptions of past events, being asked tutorial questions) contribute more to their ability to use language in a decontextualized, and even noncommunicative, way than to their literacy skills [i.e., encoding and decoding skills] per se.... It may be that literacy skills are simple enough to be acquired at school, whereas developing the skill of using language in a decontextualized way relies more heavily on experiences only homes can provide. (p. 186)

Examinations of researchers' own children, or those similarly privileged, shaped visions of the children of others, the "different." While Snow made an explicit link between "preparation" for literacy and social class (but see Snow, 1993), great pains usually were taken to make clear that "no matter what the child's background," as it were, the child could make written meaning, given appropriate experiences (i.e., proper support; Wells, 1981). Thus, developmental discourse homogenized "the child" and the

"scaffolding other" in ways that simultaneously denied differences—and made them visible in the discourse of school failure (Luke, 1993).[3]

Similar developmental discourse infused the study of child writing, including the influential work of Graves (1979, 1983) and his colleagues (for a thorough discussion of all aspects of this work, see Hillocks, 1986). As Farr (1985, p. xi) reports, "this 3-year-project started as an attempt to trace developmental patterns in children's writing in their natural classroom settings, but it evolved into a collaborative researcher-teacher effort which was a catalyst for change in writing instruction ... with special attention to the writing conferences which were the heart of the instructional approach used by the teachers."

Indeed, as Graves himself put it, "the same principles underlying a child's acquisition of language and behavior from its mother were occurring in teacher-child interactions during conferences" (Graves, 1983, p. 271). The mother/teacher fused with the expert writer, helping the child language user flesh out inexplicit meanings and develop coherent, sensible contributions (Dyson, 1994). When the scaffolding disappeared, or was internalized, the child would be able to produce "good" texts, coherent and information-rich.

As just illustrated, research on how children come to write has often blurred into discussions of how children *should* come to write—and, indeed, how teachers should teach and how parents should help (cf. Nystrand, Greene, & Wiemelt, 1993). And this may account, in part, for the persistence of the "reified text" in the pedagogical literature. Given taken-for-granted assumptions about effective teacher/student relations (Delpit, 1988; Reyes, 1992; Walker, 1992) and about the cultural mores undergirding valued texts (Gray, 1987; Gilbert, 1989; Kress, 1989), the focus of schooling is on the production of a good text (Brandt, 1990; Cook-Gumperz, 1993). Such a focus is consistent with mass education's historic insistence "on the letter in curriculum and schooling, ... operating as both the object of attention and the principal means of educational discipline" (Green, 1993, p. 198).

This close link between child writing and schooling may also account for the relative dearth of explicit attention to issues of culture, race, and class (see footnote 3). In Sleeter's (1993, p. 161) words, "people do not deny seeing what they actually do not see"; rather, they deny seeing what they can view only uncomfortably. Given the dominant belief in equal educational opportunity and the association of issues of difference with school failure, it is quite understandable that educators would aim to be "color blind."

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[3]Examples of the implicit marking of difference in the early literacy literature can be found in discussions of Heath (1982, 1983). As part of her ethnographic study of two working class communities, Heath examined cultural differences in parent/child relationships and in literacy use. She argued against the assumption of "unilinear modes of development" and for curricular recognition of the "range of alternatives to ways of learning and displaying knowledge [that] characterizes all highly school-successful adults...." (1982, p. 73). In the early literacy literature, Heath's work becomes further evidence of the ineffective "informal instruction" of "other" parents (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, pp. 23-4; see also Morrow, 1989).

Wider, deeper perspectives. To say that the reified text and the homogenized child continue is not, however, to say that they are unchallenged. In the years since the child's psycholinguistic gifts were first noted and their helpful interactive partners documented, new visions have emerged, not only of language development, but of literacy itself (Nystrand, Greene, & Wiemelt, 1993). Many scholars have investigated the interactional breadth of literacy, how, as an activity, it is organized within the interactional rhythms and cultural values of community and family life (Basso, 1974; Heath, 1983; Philips, 1975; Szwed, 1981). Moreover, historians have illustrated that the reification of text—treating a written message as fixed in meaning and independent of an author and an ideology—is a means for social control and political oppression (e.g., Coulmas, 1989; Graff, 1987; Street, 1984). Indeed, even Olson, whose 1977 discussion of the "autonomous text" inspired much debate, has acknowledged the cultural and historical specificity of text meaning (Olson, 1991; see also his [1990] exchange with Nystrand.)

New visions of the social construction of literacy, and its embeddedness in ideological struggles, have not made unimportant children's powers of invention or their helpful interactions with others. But they have problematized developmental language that foregrounds individual invention and the disappearing other. *First*, given a dialogic perspective on literacy, children's written language learning is not only contextualized within helpful relationships; part of children's developmental challenge is to learn to manipulate relationships—to achieve particular responses from others—through the written medium in a breadth of social situations. And among those most amenable to children's manipulations are, in fact, other children (Corsaro & Miller, 1992; Daiute, 1993; Dyson, 1989).

Second, given the theoretical perspective of dialogism, learning to write is not only interactional work, but ideological work as well; that is, it involves writing oneself into, or in some way against, taken-for-granted assumptions, including assumptions about relations of teacher and student, adult and child, of people of different races, gender, and classes. Evidence of such work is seen most notably in feminist analyses of school children's texts (e.g., Davies, 1993; Gilbert, 1994; Kamler, 1993). These authors tend to focus on children's products and to illuminate the discursive material which children are subjected to and through which children subjectify themselves. That is, they illustrate how children use particular "once-upon-a-time" worlds to read and write themselves as boys or girls.

In this essay, guided by dialogic visions of language, I am interested in children's texts, not only as ideological material, but as mediational tools. For children's differentiation of *writing* possibilities is linked to their differentiation of *social* possibilities, of who and how they can be in the particular circumstances of their daily lives. As I will illustrate, children may choose or reject ways of writing that they judge "boyish" or "girlie," "rad" or "sweet," "cool" or "boring." Social allegiance and social conflict—children's changing sense of the "we" experience—organizes and directs their ways of writing (Dyson, 1993).

Thus, children are not only meaning makers but also meaning negotiators, learning to participate in the social world, to adopt, resist or stretch available words. To understand development, we cannot take as our reference point a vision of "the child" constructed to fit comfortably within the "objective security and tenability provided by the whole social order," to return to Volosinov's words. With such a reference point, culture, class, gender, and other constructed categories are simply "variables" that may or may not affect children's developmental progress—their gradual becoming of grown up like "us," however "us" is defined.

The point herein is not that these societal markers may make development problematic; it is that they are potentially critical aspects of our sense of, and expression of, self and other. Understanding the what (e.g., the genre) and the how (e.g., the guiding interactive and ideological processes) of children's writing requires constructing children themselves as complex social and cultural beings.

In the next section, I explore what it might mean to write developing child composers in this way. To do so, I first briefly acknowledge my own repositioning as a child observer, and then I draw on an ongoing ethnographic study of 7-year-old Sammy and his classmates. My intention is not to present a fully elaborate research report but to more fully elaborate my ideas by giving them play in a classroom.

A DIALOGIC PERSPECTIVE ON LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Writing Children

My writing of children has reflected the shifts in perspectives, and the ideological repositioning, discussed above. A person of the changing times, my first studies highlighted writing as orthographic system and communicative medium; influenced by Olson (1977), I assumed that, as individual child writers developed, their texts became increasingly unambiguous or autonomous representations of meaning (Dyson, 1981). At the same time, the ethnographic research tools I used—tools of naturalistic observing and interpretive analysis, highlighted children's use of language in culturally-valued events, as they interacted with those around them (see Cazden, Hymes, and John, 1972, for an influential presentation of these ideas). Thus, my initial developmental questions about changes in children's texts became increasingly embedded within questions of children's social lives.

For example, in a longitudinal study (Dyson, 1989 [begun in 1985]), I examined child writers in the context of a school program that allowed the use of diverse media during a daily composing time. Thus, young children initially "wrote" their stories primarily by drawing them, often accompanying their drawing with playful talking and dramatizing; their written texts were primarily brief comments on their pictures. Over time, they began to use writing for functions earlier served by their drawing, talk, and dramatic play

(see also Gundlach, 1982; Werner & Kaplan, 1963); and *those shifts of function and form were dynamically linked with their participation in the peer social life of the classroom.*

For instance, many children used "Once upon a time" in their texts, a literary phrase they appropriated from known texts. But they did not evidence a practical understanding of the functional work of that phrase: "once-upon-a-time" introduced facts and opinions, personal narratives and imaginary stories. For the children, the phrase's representational function in cuing a relationship between the real and the imagined, and its interactional function in establishing common ground, became salient as their written "once-upon-a-time's" entered into the critical and playful dialogue of the peer group. Thus, children's growth as writers was linked to their participation as social players in both the official and the unofficial (or peer) classroom cultures. The horizontal dimension of literacy use was firmly visible now in my own work, as in that of many others.

And yet, despite this interest in culture and in language, I did not highlight the observed children's cultural resources as members of diverse ethnic communities. Indeed, my focus on primarily working-class (and, most often, minority) children was due at least in part to personal comfort and familiarity, that is, to my own working-class consciousness, rooted in childhood experiences. And perhaps in part for this reason (and, also, because of an interest in individuals), the valuable discourse of cultural differences was not a dominant one for me—it is predicated on a relationship between representatives of the cultural "mainstream" and those of the cultural "other," and moreover, it downplays the issues of political and economic power that undergirded my own sense (as a white researcher) of difference.

Such issues of personal and social history are not irrelevant. Ethnographic researchers are not ventriloquists, as Geertz (1988) notes; they cannot speak for others, especially for others as removed from the adult now as children. Rather, they are writers, who construct others' lives. Researchers' own life experiences—their age, gender, ethnicity, class, indeed, their very status as outsider—"both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight" (Rosaldo, 1988, p. 19). Moreover, their experiences make it easier, or more difficult, to adopt disciplinary discourses.

For me, the recent rise of dialogic perspectives on culture and identity has allowed new conceptual tools for writing the sociocultural complexities of children's lives. With these tools, individuals can be written as members of diverse cultural reference groups, among them, those based on ethnic membership, economic circumstance, age, gender, and institutional structure. Language becomes a means of negotiating membership in intersecting groups, not a mark of static cultural identification. Moreover, negotiating membership is not just an interactional accomplishment but an ideological phenomenon, one involving conforming to, or challenging, the existent social order (whether consciously or not).

Thus, a more recent longitudinal study (Dyson, 1993) focused on young children in an urban school serving neighborhoods that differed in ethnic

culture and social circumstance. The study highlighted children's oral and written use of diverse cultural resources, including those rooted in their home communities, the popular or common culture of the peer group, and the official world of school. The developmental question undergirding the research was, How does writing come to be a useful tool in children's negotiation of their complex social worlds? The developmental end goal was not tightly constructed "autonomous" text but discourse flexibility and a practical (situated) understanding of the social dynamics and political complexities of writing.

The following portrait of Sammy comes from an ongoing extension of that study, which delves further into the intersection of interactional *and* ideological complexities—the vertical dimension—of children's literacy lives. And to do so, the study focuses on children's use of popular culture, as I explain below in my portrait of Sammy.

Writing Sammy

Sammy was a member of a primary grade class I observed during their second and third grade years, observations shared with and informed by their skilled teacher, Kristin. The children attended an urban school serving mainly two neighborhoods, one an African American, low-income and working-class community, and the other, an integrated but primarily European American working- and middle-class community. This, then, was a school in which there were sharp contrasts in children's backgrounds and, moreover, one where there were clear connections between race and class. And these differences sometimes emerged in interpersonal tensions among children (and, indeed, among parents [Conrad, in preparation]).

This essay draws primarily on the children's experiences during their second grade year, when I visited their school from two to five times per week for the final three months of the school year. (The Appendix provides pseudonyms for, and demographic information on, all second graders.) The children's teacher, Kristin, had taken over the second grade in March of the school year; at that time, she incorporated writing throughout the school day, including during a daily composing time. As part of that daily period, she also initiated a very popular classroom practice called Author's Theater. In this practice, related to one used by teachers of young (e.g., Paley, 1980) and older (e.g., Dixon & Stratta, 1986) students, the children chose classmates to act out (i.e., play out) their written stories.

As designer of Author's Theater, Kristin's goal was to encourage and improve her children's writing. She assumed that their ways of writing would change because of the *interactional* guidance provided by classmates and by herself as teacher. Thus, children would work to write in ways that would yield more elaborate and more pleasing play. However, when the children brought peer play into the official classroom world, they also brought in the *ideological* complexities of that play, particularly through their superhero stories. As Kristin and I learned, the children's ways of writing

would also change because of their efforts to maintain or resist taken-for-granted "cultural storylines" (Gilbert, 1994, p. 124) about human relations, including those linked to race, class, and gender.

The children, as individuals and as a collective, wrote many kinds of stories with roots in experiences at home and at school. But it was the superhero story that allowed the most insight into the intersection of the children's social and ideological worlds. These stories, rooted in the popular media, are, in fact, planned by their corporate sponsors to do just that—to appeal to children as peer group members by highlighting their ideologically-informed desires as members of particular gender and age groups (Kline, 1993). And thus it was these stories that drew my attention, as well as the children's.

In my efforts to understand the social and ideological dynamics of their writing, I analyzed the content and interactional structure of the talk surrounding that writing. Through this inductive analysis, I constructed a category system to describe the children's social goals (e.g., affiliating with others, controlling them, and, more equitably, negotiating with them), and, also, the ways in which the written texts served those goals (see Table 1).

At first many children, including Sammy, used written texts primarily as *props* for (or, more accurately, as "tickets" to) the theater; their texts were largely invisible—they stood up and pretended to read texts that were not actually written. The children relied on oral language—and sometimes drawing in their writing books—to represent their ideas and to enter into the classroom social life. Over time, though, their texts became more important—they began to serve as *representations of valued characters and actions*, as *reinforcers of their authority*, their right to say how the world is, and as *dialogic mediators* between themselves and others, as ways of anticipating and responding to others' reactions to their stories.

Through case study analysis of the writing and talking of particular children, including Sammy, ongoing informal interviews with children and teacher, and, more broadly, ethnographic analysis of all class members' official and unofficial discussions of gender, race, and power (i.e., strength), I began to trace the interplay between the changing dynamics of children's classroom lives and the changing content and structure of their written texts. In the following sections, then, I draw on this work to tell the story of second-grade Sammy.

The Case of Sammy

Introduction

Sammy had joined the second grade class in March—a hard time to enter a classroom. Friendship and play partners are well established by then. Out on the playground, Sammy hung by himself or tearfully complained to Kristin that no one would play with him. But in the more contained world of the

Table 1
Data Analysis Categories

CATEGORY
SOCIAL GOAL
Affiliation: interacting in ways that emphasize one's similarity to others in a particular group;
Solicitation: interacting in ways that entice others' desire to be included in one's own plans;
Allowance: interacting in ways that allow desiring others to be included in one's plans;
Control: interacting in ways that direct others to comply with one's own plans;
Compliance or Resistance: interacting in ways that comply with or resist others' plans;
Negotiation: interacting in ways that involve mutual accommodation between two or more participants, each seeking some control.
TEXTUAL FUNCTIONS
Text as Ticket: The written text functions to allow children to have a turn directing or controlling their peers; the paper is thus both a ticket allowing access to, and a prop for the child enacting the role of, the author—the authority—in an Author's Theater event. (E.g., sometimes children's texts were invisible, as it were—they pretended to read texts that were not actually written.)
Text as Memory Support: The written text functions to help children remember information relevant to their stories or the stories themselves. (E.g., children often jotted down names of story characters, matched with names of child actors, even when they used an "invisible" text.)
Text as Representation: The written text functions to represent valued characters, relations among characters, and actions. (E.g., boys often chose superhero thematic material, which marked their maleness in this class.)
Text as Authority (The "Reified" Text): The written text functions to reinforce the control of the author. (E.g., when girls complained that boys did not include female characters in their stories, the boys often replied by repeating their complaint but without any sense of personal responsibility [i.e., with a variant of "Yes, there are no girls in this story"]; that is, they implied that the matter was out of their hands as authors—the texts were set.)
Text as Dialogic: The written text functions fully as a mediator of relationships among author, actors, and audience members. Its mediational role is not only interpersonal but also ideological. (E.g., in response to the objections of others, the author might change the written relationship between males and females; most often, such changes occurred in a forthcoming text, not in the one under criticism.)

classroom, Sammy made many bids for affiliation. One important tool for such affiliation was the material of popular culture, particularly superhero stories.

These stories were pervasive on the playground, where teams of good guys and bad guys chased each other wildly about, engaging in mock battles. In unofficial classroom interactions, the stories appeared in boys' collaborative talk about remembered media events and in their competitive talk about who knew most about which characters. And in the official world, many boys wrote stories based on the popular media. Initially, such stories focused on "teen-age ninjas" (the mutant turtle or the regular human variety), but, in time, the karate-using ninjas were overtaken by "X-men," a collective of superheroes (all human but with mutant powers).

Given the popularity of these figures, and his own desire to belong, it is not surprising that Sammy too, an initially resistant writer, began to compose superhero stories. To refer again to Figure 1, Sammy's desired horizontal or interactional relationship was affiliation with the boys, and his vertical or ideological means of achieving this relationship—the most available words—were the superhero stories. Moreover, Sammy's interest in writing coincided with the introduction of Author's Theater, an opportunity for public affiliation with, and indeed, some control over, his peers.

The superhero stories, with their emphasis on male action, articulated Sammy and his peers within stereotypical gender relationships. As Sammy worked to be included in the peer group, the ideological substance of his discourse material influenced what he attended to and worked to control as a writer. In a dialogic manner, his texts in turn "refracted" (Volosinov, 1986, p. 23) the peer group, making salient for Sammy the ways in which his own writing included and excluded others. Thus, Sammy's ways of participating in the Author's Theater were shaped, not only by his interactional work with teacher and peers, but also by his ideological positioning and repositioning in the classroom, as will be evident in the following first chapter of Sammy's story.

Chapter One: Text as Ticket, or, Sammy Gets to Play

Sammy's first superhero texts were variants on his initial writing book entries, which were brief texts about "having fun." Compare, for example, excerpts from his text about Chuck E Cheese (a popular pizza and amusement place) and with his first about the three teen-age ninjas (Rocky, Tum Tum, and Colt):

Once upon a time
I went to Chuck E Chees
and I had fun.
and I ride in the cars
and we had pizza the
End

Rocky and tomtom and
Colt went for a
summer vacation when
there grandpa came.
And they went to
swim and they had
fun.

Like many young child writers, Sammy composed new stories by reworking controlled text material. But the way in which Sammy elaborated upon these texts—and the new material he incorporated—was linked to the sociocultural complexities of classroom life.

During the composing period, Sammy actually spent little time physically writing his superhero stories. Most of the time, he was deeply involved in *oral* negotiations. Sammy used planned "good guy" roles to solicit the involvement of the boys, especially the high-status boys. There was an underlying rule (made explicit in disputes) that desirable roles should go to those who first requested them, but this rule was not always followed. Sammy—indeed, boys of diverse heritages—typically allowed Seth and his "sidekick" Jonathan whatever good guy role they requested. Not only were Seth and Jonathan the only two middle-class boys, which class was evident in their dress, possessions, and reported experiences, a relative of Seth's was a local celebrity well-known to the children. On the other hand, bad guy roles went to boys whose involvement was not solicited and who often found out about a planned Author's Theater too late to gain a desired role.

Sammy also found the female role useful for negotiating with the boys. The ninja stories had just one plum female role: Emily in the human ninja stories, April in the ninja turtle ones (April in particular was a "babe," a real "fox," as the turtles said). In one of his early ninja stories, Sammy offered Seth, Jonathan, and Radha starring roles and then sweetened the pot, as it were:

> Sammy: And you know who April is? Melissa.
>
> Radha smiles at this, eyes widening, being playfully dramatic. He turns and grins at Seth and Jonathan.

In the ninja stories, Sammy, Seth, Jonathan, and Radha were all on the same male team, friends united in their toughness and in their admiration of a female. The admired female was typically either Melissa or Sarah, two white, middle-class, and friendly girls (neither of whom was familiar with ninja stories, because they were not allowed to watch shows with violence in them). These girls did not seek these roles; they were sought: while looking like a superhero was not necessary for the boys, looking like the featured "foxy babe" was necessary; after all, it is physical features, not physical power, that mark the female role.

When the time came to take to the classroom stage for Author's Theater, Sammy pretended to read his brief texts. He relied on *oral* storytelling to play the superhero game to the fullest, as he did in the presentation of his first 3 ninjas story, excerpted below:

> Sammy has come to the front of the room, called his actors, and now begins to read:

Sammy: "Rocky [Nyem], and Tum Tum [Radha], and Colt [Seth] went for a summer vacation. When their Grandpa came" back [end of literal reading, abandonment of text] Rocky had jump on Grandpa [Kevin] car. And um —JUMP ON GRANDPA CAR (directing Nyem, who complies). And Grandpa got mad. GRANDPA GOT MAD! (directing Kevin). And Grandpa wanted to wop Rocky. (much audience laughter) Then Emily [Sarah] coming and um and Rocky says "Hi Girl Friend!" (more whoops from audience) Rocky said "Hi Girl Friend" to Emily. SAY IT. SAY IT. (Nyem refuses, while Sarah rolls her eyes.)

...

And um and um Rocky—, Rocky—, Rocky—, Rocky, and Tum Tum and Colt, they went to fight all the bad guys (only Aloyse is a bad guy)

...

I need some more—FREEZE! FREEZE! I need some more people to be bad guys.

Girls as well as boys are eager, which surprises Sammy. "You want to be a bad guy?" he says to them with evident puzzlement. He does not allow such gender-shifting, however, but picks two more boys. And finally the fight begins, and "the good guys won."

After Sammy's presentation, the children commented on how much fun they did (or did not) have. Kevin had had fun being Grandpa, but other children were not so pleased. The girls in particular were upset because they had had no role—with the exception of Sarah, who had a small, in her words, "embarrassing" part. Even Seth, who had had a major role as Colt, was not happy:

Seth: It was sort of wierd um when we were when me and the other kids were doing the stuff because we didn't really have any parts. It wasn't enough action. Kevin was the one who had the most action in the whole story.

Sammy was sensitive to the complaining children, particularly Seth. In fact, his decision to begin writing X-men stories was made to better please—better regulate his relationship with—Seth and Jonathan. Moreover, it was his desire to literally join them in play that first made salient his text, not simply as a ticket to the superhero game, but as the interactional stuff of—the representational material for—the game itself.

Chapter Two: Text as Representational Material, or, Sammy's Short Story

Within a week of the Rocky and Tum Tum event, Sammy decided to write a Superman story, a decision he announced to his tablemate, Patrick, and to Radha, who was on his way to sit by Seth and Jonathan. Radha immediately requested, and was granted, the Superman role, and then Sammy began to write:

Once upon a time there was superman and bad guys and they wanted to destroy superman.

More so than the earlier 3 ninjas text, Sammy was structuring this text in the basic manner of most children's superhero stories: after the optional "Once upon a time," the good guys were introduced, the bad guy characters arrived on the scene, and then the "fun" (the fighting) began. However, Sammy's text soon proved problematic, as I illustrate below.

Radha returns to Sammy's table, this time on a mission from Seth and Jonathan:

Radha: Make Seth and Jonathan be in it, OK?

Sammy: OK.

Radha: Good guys!

Patrick: They can't be a good guy. There's not enough room. There's only Superman. (to Sammy) Is there any more room for good guys? (Patrick refers to common knowledge of the superhero story as providing "room" for players; the text itself is a sort of ticket to play the story out.)

Sammy: YOU COULD BE A GOOD GUY! (yelling at Seth, who is kitty corner on another table)

Patrick: WHO? I thought there was only Superman in it.

Sammy: I'm doing X-men. (quietly to Patrick)

Radha is still standing by Sammy's table.

Radha: Could you (let) Jonathan be Superboy? *Pl:ea::se.*

Patrick: NO! He's doing X-men.

Radha: Then I'm not playing—oh, X-men? (pleased)

Patrick: X-men.

Sammy: Now good guys can be X-men.

Radha: I'm Gambit [an X-men character].

Sammy: No you're Wolverine [another character]. (Sammy, as he later confides in me, wants to be Gambit and is hoping to get Sarah to be Rogue, a female X-man character romantically linked to Gambit.)

Radha: I want Gambit. (And, indeed, he maintains Gambit—temporarily; but, as I will explain later, Sammy does succeed in getting Radha to abandon the role of Gambit.)

Sammy revised his text, making only one change, but an important one; instead of *Superman*, which word had limited good guy possibilities, he wrote the word *X-men*, which term potentially yielded a large team of good guys. Indeed, these mutant humans, with fantastic powers, soon took over as

the dominant superheroes during writing time. Still, for Sammy, the focus on the text itself was momentary; the text remained primarily a ticket.

And, having secured a ticket to what promised to be a very good time, Sammy had no intention of being left out of the play. When his turn came for Author's Theater, he asked his peer Margaret to read his piece for him. And thus—quite inadvertently—Sammy's written text assumed a new functional role. No longer a mere ticket, his text was to serve as a representation of the story itself. So Margaret read that story, exactly as it was written (something Sammy never did). The play began—and shortly thereafter, it ended.

Margaret: "Once upon a time there was X-men, the bad guys and they tried to destroy X-men."

The children begin to play out a mock battle, but, after a few minutes, they begin to stare at each other and at Margaret, waiting for her to do what Margaret cannot do: read more. Sammy's stories are always very long—but not this time, for some reason. The children sit down, grumbling about the short story. Sammy blames Kristin:

Sammy: Ms. S. [Kristin] said we have 5 minutes and I couldn't finish it. I'll finish it tomorrow.

But he immediately follows this with another plan:

Sammy: Maybe we could play outside.
...
Maybe at recess if I finish we could play X-men.

The link between "team" games on the playground and superhero stories in the classroom was now explicitly made; and implicit in that link was, from my vantage point as observer, a key developmental challenge posed by this official school activity, that is, the need to differentiate the nature of written play from that of recess play and, particularly for Sammy, the role of affiliated player from responsible author. Was the text to be merely a *ticket* to good guy/bad guy play, or an appealing *representation* for an audience? Within the context of composing time, what did an appealing, mutually satisfying text entail?[4] Group chase games and mock fights composed a good time on the playground, but they were not pleasing everyone during Authors' Theater.

As Kristin and the children talked, Sammy's text was framed and reframed as ticket and as representation, his social goal as affiliation (through the use of common knowledge), control (through the use of authorial direction), and audience negotiation (through responding to others' expectations and desires):

---

[4]As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, part of the complexity of this task is that it is an *official*, albeit a "permeable" (Dyson, 1993), one (i.e., one in which the expectations of unofficial peer worlds must be reconciled with explicit teacher direction and feedback). Thus, learning to participate successfully in this activity entails more than learning to write; it also entails learning to do school.

Susan: There wasn't so much action.

Sammy: I know, 'cause it was too short. 'Cause I didn't finish it. Ms. S. said we have 5 minutes and I couldn't finish it when the time was up. (Note the reference to text as representation, as an object to be constructed.)

Kristin: Sammy, was your *writing* any different this time than it was the last time, or was it the same?

Sammy: It was the same, it was just the same thing.

...

Jonathan: Well, there was definitely enough action. (to Susan)

...

It was just the beginning of the story because first it tells the group [i.e., the team] and then it's probably gonna tell what it does.

Kristin: So you're looking at it [a text representation] sort of as in progress?

Sammy: When we go outside, we're gonna play a different X-men. We're gonna still have the same people, but Radha say he don't wanna be Gambit [for reasons I have yet to explain], so I'll be Gambit. (Note his use of text as ticket to opportunity to play.)

...

Johnetta (a girl persistent enough to get a bad guy role): The only thing we was doing was just fighting. We wasn't doing nothing good like talking or nothing, but we just fighted through the whole thing.

...

Sammy: See we did talk, see we would, see all the good guys, but not the bad guys. Yeah the good guys, they talked. You know when they be saying—and Professor [the X-men leader] is Kevin, 'cause he tell them when the bad things and good things come and stuff. (Sammy is assuming that the common knowledge of X-men should satisfy Johnetta. He does not need to specify talk—talk, the giving of orders, is implicit in the role of Professor.)

...

Radha: And also Professor X can read minds [so he doesn't have to talk].

...

Kristin: So does anybody else have comments and questions for Sammy?

Thomas: Whose team I on?

Sammy: You're on the gobd guys' team. Wolverine [an X-men character] is a good guy.

...

Sammy: Yes Jonathan? (a very sweet voice)

Jonathan: Well if Thomas is gonna be Wolverine, I'm just out of it.

...

Radha: He's [Jonathan's] Wolverine.

Sammy: Oh yeah, I forgot. (Actually, Sammy had promised both Thomas and Jonathan the same role.)

The children's talk revealed writing issues that were central to class discussions throughout the second and third grade, issues that, at their core, are about how (the horizontal) relationships between authors and others are mediated by talk and text. With Kristin's guidance, and in the context of ongoing play, the children considered the value of detailing action and their conflicting views of "interesting" action (e.g., talking vs. fighting). They discussed as well their differing understandings of characters' motivations (e.g., children with common knowledge of media stories vs. those without such knowledge) and the distinction between "fair" players, who allow everyone a turn, and "main" characters, who get more turns than anyone else.

These issues arose from and influenced the children's composing: individuals' ways of writing, of participating, changed as did the collective's talk about and expectations for "once-upon-a-time" texts. For example, in his very next composing event, Sammy explicitly worried about writing enough "action." He thus began to shift some of the functional load of specifying appealing acts to his writing, rather than relying so heavily on speech or on his audience's knowledge of predictable characters. Such textual deliberations were influenced by both the deliberate "scaffolding" of the teacher and the deliberate complaints and pleasures of peers.

However, as I discuss below, in his next event, Sammy reflected on more than "action." He reflected too on the implicit "we," to speak, underlying his stories, that is, on the words he was making available to others.

Chapter 3: Text as Dialogue, or, Sammy and the X-Women

Within his first two months in the classroom, Sammy was becoming a "typical" boy writer; that is, many young boys, in diverse societies, emphasize physical action in their texts (e.g. Kamler, 1993; Nicolopoulou, Scales, & Weintraub, 1994), a quality exaggerated by the superhero stories within which Sammy—and his male classmates—found common ground. Conversely, female classmates—like Holly and Tina—were becoming "typical" girl writers; they wrote about feelings and relationships, including their feelings about each other.[5] Thus, for Sammy, writing differently—writing female characters in action, for instance, or, more broadly, describing characters' reactions (their feelings) as well as their actions—would necessitate writing himself differently. (For a full analysis of gender conflict in the children's superhero play, see Dyson, in press.)

And, in fact, Sammy was under social pressure to do just that. There were voices of discontent in this classroom, voices that resonated with Sammy. For Sammy was a much more complex character than the narrative to this point might have suggested. The complex textures of Sammy's sense of self—his

[5]During the second grade year of the project, approximately *48%* of all written products by girls centered on relationships with family and friends (30 of 63); *76%* of girls' products included specific named emotions. Only *14%* of the boys' products (9 of 65) were so centered and less than *1%* included specific named emotions. In contrast, *46%* of the boys' texts drew on media superheroes stories, but only *8%* of the girls' did.

we-experiences—"expand[ed] and contract[ed] according to circumstance" (Williams, 1991, p. 11).

In the context of Author's Theater, Sammy *did* work hard to be accepted by the boys, especially Seth, a play leader, and his sidekick Jonathan; indeed, he explicitly worried that these children might not like him because of his race. But Sammy shared cultural and racial common ground (not to mention a neighborhood) with Holly and Tina, two working-class girls of color who were very interested in superhero stories *and* who were also the most vocal objectors to the boys' exclusion of girls. Perhaps in part because of this common ground, and more generally, his vulnerability—his desire to please, these girls pushed Sammy hard. And when the girls begged, Sammy *was* responsive, eventually giving a rationale for his denial or, when under heavy pressure, making up an alternative role (e.g., telling Holly she could be April's friend). In contrast, other prolific superhero writers and Author's Theater participants deflected all protesters with reference to the authority of the text (e.g., "See? [showing text] There's nothing in here for a girl").

The girls became particularly forceful when the X-men arrived in the classroom. They *knew* their options were limited in ninja stories. As their classmate Rhonda explained, "Everybody want to be April, but—'cause—there's supposed to be *one* April." Or, as Briana put it, the ninjas only have "one girl that needs some help.... They have *girls* in that [X-men] show. And they have some ... black girls and some white girls.... The X-men are friends, and they help each other." Moreover, the "X-men" women, to quote Sammy, are "as strong as men."

Indeed, the girls' favorite X-men character was Rogue precisely because she is so "tough"—able to fly great distances and to absorb the mutant powers of others. In contrast, the girls were wary of playing Storm, a Black woman who can control the weather, because she gets exhausted from controlling the weather—"knocked out"—and Rogue regularly saves her.

And yet, the powerful X-men women were rendered quite powerless in the boys' X-men stories. Certain X-men characters, like Rogue and Gambit, are sometimes romantically linked in the X-men media stories. And this romantic potential was more salient to the boys than the collaborative potential of a tough co-ed X-men team.

So Sammy used the X-men female roles just as he had the ninja's April and Emily—as material for the gender play so rampant in the elementary school (Thorne, 1983). For example, in that first X-men story, the one in which Rahda was front man for Seth and Jonathan, Tina and Holly had begged for the role of Rogue, and Sammy *had* granted the role to Tina—but then he said, "You [Tina] marry Rahda, 'cause he Gambit." Tina, Holly, *and* Rahda immediately abandoned their roles (to avoid being teased and the almost inevitable chant of "Rogue and Gambit sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G"). Thus Sammy was free to quietly become Gambit and to solicit Sarah for the role of Rogue.

Unlike Sammy, though, most boys just avoided girls, so that the good guys and the bad guys could proceed safely in their mutual destruction, without

the threat of potentially humiliating teasing. A variant of "There ain't gonna be no girl in it" was a common reassurance from one boy to another.

After many incidents like that in which Sammy teased Tina and Holly away from the X-men crew, the two girls took the superhero texts into their own hands. Indeed, they decided to write X-men stories with "no boys," to quote Tina, precisely "'cause the boys doesn't let us play." The girls thus assumed the power of the pencil, and, in retaliation for past wrongs, they made Sammy—and others boys desiring parts—*beg*.

These girls, however, were situated in the social world differently than Sammy and the boys, and they offered new social visions of superhero stories. In their texts, the superhero teams were dominated by women of color, and the team played out relationships more than plots.

For example, Holly chose a pleading Sammy to be a nameless bad guy in her first written X-men text (not the role he wanted); his fellow bad guys were Tina and Rhonda, who *wanted* bad guy roles. The bad guys fought a good guys team of two women (Holly herself and Liliana) and one man (Radha). And those good guys had conflicted feelings about how much fun it really was to be good guys. In the following text excerpt, exhausted X-men complain about their responsibilities:

> Once upon a time there was
> a grop of people it was the X-Men.
> Storm said I am tirde [tired] of
> changing the weather
> but you have to keep working
> Arckangel said. I'm tired
> of working too, rogue said.
> I have to save storm evre time
> she fall. I get tired of
> fighting bad guys.

In Holly's world view, sometimes the good guys just wanted to leave the bad guys alone.

So Sammy found himself positioned in a very different text world, one organized by a child with whom he had been in much social conflict. And that conflict—and, perhaps too, the experience of literally being in her alternative world—seemed to make salient for him new kinds of choices as a writer, new kinds of relations. In his very next writing event, the final one of the school year, Sammy wrote another X-men story:

> Once upon a time there was X-men.
> And they was friends.
> And the bad guys was mean.
> And the X-men went to Pizza Hut.
> And the bad guys come in
> and they started to fight
> and the X-men won.

While writing this story, Sammy explicitly planned to write some fun "action" for the X-men (getting pizza), and he also deliberately planned to include all the major female X-men. He did not specify their names in writing (something he would do in the third grade), but he did orally *solicit* (i.e., he asked in an open-ended way who wanted to fill) both the male and the female roles; the girls did not have to beg.[6] Thus Sammy took to the stage a gender-balanced X-men story: there were 4 girls and 5 boys (and it was racially balanced as well).

Moreover, although he did not yet have his characters expressing their reactions to each other (i.e., their relationships—something he would also do in the third grade), he was conscious that something had changed—that he had reimagined his social world and found new possibilities. After his Author's Theater was over, Sammy himself, with no prompting from any one, said, "And there were really more X-men. The *X-people* were boys and girls, and the um bad guys were boys and girls"—a semantic change (from *X-men* to *X-people*) to mark the ideological one.[7,8]

Like the interactional issues, the ideological ones raised in the second grade continued in the third. Among these issues were: How are boys and girls represented in the superhero stories they watch and those they read? How do superheroes look, talk, and walk? Does, as a child said one day, April "have to be white"? What kind of lives do they have, particularly away from the scene of physical action? Who is displayed as strong, as afraid—are the

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[6]Interestingly, Sammy did *not* solicit the involvement of Seth and Jonathan; he was sitting at a table with a group of boys (Asian, Black, and white) who had chosen to sit together. Securely a part of that group, he allowed the X-men male roles to whoever wanted them at his work table.

[7]Holly did not attend the project school during her third grade year. Nonetheless, a third grade Sammy "made up" her story about the dutiful X-men doing their work despite exhaustion—he included the same characters and the same exchange between Archangel and Storm, evidence that appearing in her story was a significant experience for Sammy.

[8]I acknowledge that I have been seriously examining children's use of cultural material that adults may find highly distasteful. Indeed, much controversy surrounds the dominance of media figures in child culture. While these controversies are too complex for discussion here, and while I have considerable concern about the influence of the market economy on the lives of children, as a researcher, I am interested in these stories because children are interested in them. I note too that superheroes with powers from alien sources, creatures who enjoy violence, and women who are valued for and who value superficial appearances are not the sole province of the popular media, as is suggested by the following excerpt from third-grade Sammy's essay (draft) on the god Mars:

> When he [Mars] went to battle he didn't care who won. He just wanted blood to shed. His friends got people to fight[.] When he got cut he would scream[.] When the cut was healed he would fight fight again[.] Venus fell in love with Mars[.] Nobody liked mars because he was mean[.] Venus liked mars because he was cute

—a reasonably accurate interpretation of a classic Greek character as presented in written works for young children.

strong ever afraid? What does it mean to say that someone "writes like a girl" or "like a boy?" Do all children agree with those ideas?

These issues too had to do with how texts mediate relationships between authors and others. But they involved more than mutual expectations for sensible and fun stories; they drew children's attention to the words they made available to each other, to their ways of limiting or creating possibilities for action and interaction, for relationships among themselves, as boys and girls, as people of different heritages, demeanors, and dispositions. Such critical reflection and social action have not been valued "skills" in our schools. As I suggest in the final section of this article, seriously studying, not only how children learn to *construct text worlds through social negotiation,* but how they learn to *construct social worlds through textual negotiation* would go a long way toward the "new breed of developmental theory" with which this essay began.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING CHILDREN, WRITING PEDAGOGY, AND WRITING OURSELVES

> [L]ife is development, and ... developing, growing, is life.... Since life means growth, a living creature lives as truly and positively at one stage as at another.
>
> —Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916, pp. 49, 51)

We who are concerned with development define children's challenges, the desired endgoals, in the light of our notions of what it means to be an educated, mature adult. We see children as our past—people who are not yet what we are—and as our future, people who must carry on our own work. In the popular language of the time, children are our apprentices, ourselves in the making. In literacy education, this has meant seeing children as young authors, learning to construct coherent and cohesive words.

In this essay, I have tried to offer another view, a view of children as complex people, learning to construct more coherent and cohesive worlds. To this end, I have aimed to make problematic the easy insertion of children into relational frames that take for granted the life worlds of adults. Indeed, I have aimed to re-imagine both ourselves and our children as interconnected members of a complex society, one in which gender, class, color, age, and other human markers influence one's life style and world view, one's relations with others. Thus, in the spirit of Dewey, I also have aimed to contextualize children's growth as writers of words within the fullness of their worlds.

For Our Efforts to Write Children ...

This has meant refraining from "interpreting everything children do as some sort of learning experience" (Gaskin, Miller, & Corsaro, 1992, p. 17). Children are not first and foremost learners; they are first and foremost people living the complexities of their day-to-day lives. Thus, if literacy is the

rendering of a relationship in graphic symbols, if the differentiation of a symbol system is linked to the differentiation of social possibilities, then we cannot make sense of children's literacy learning without making sense of children's interactive lives—the who, what, where, why, and when of their language use. Both individuals and contexts develop each other in substantive and dynamic ways.

For example, writing Sammy's desires for affiliation made sensible his choice of cultural material, his exploitation of media stories widely accessible and compellingly filled with peer group pleasures—action-packed encounters between good guys and bad guys, tension-producing boy/girl chase games, and playful opportunities to quite literally control the world. At the same time, the context—the symbolic and social possibilities of Author's Theater—made sensible Sammy's reliance upon his oral powers. His understanding of *written* possibilities for meeting social expectations evolved along with the classroom literacy culture itself.

Understanding child writing within the fullness of their lives, however, means more than attending to interactional complexity—it means attending to ideological complexity as well. Children's ways of writing reflect their interpretations of their own social place—potential or actual—in an ongoing dialogue. Thus, desiring membership in his new classroom community, Sammy exploited discourse material that would position him as a member of the tough guys' team. But his stories of power, reflecting dominant ideologies about male action and female passivity and beauty, rendered marginal aspects of Sammy's own identity and that of others (for a rich discussion of marginalization in literacy teaching and learning, see Luke, Gale, & Singh, in press). His social conflicts—not only his social interactions—helped make salient for him new kinds of writing choices, newly imagined relationships.

As it is for us all, Sammy's need to deprivilege his "own" words—to situate them within the sociocultural and ideological complexities of particular situations, will be an ongoing one; the specifics of his challenges will change along with the social configurations of this growing child's daily life. Whether or not—and the manner in which—these challenges become salient for Sammy will depend upon opportunities to, and reasons for, using words to negotiate new relations with others, to enter new Bakhtinian dialogues.

For Our Efforts to Write Pedagogy ...

If we as teachers take seriously a vision of writing as negotiating relationships, *and* if we acknowledge the sociocultural complexity of children's lives, then we cannot write our pedagogical goal as the production of any one language style (e.g., language in which ideas are made explicit in tightly constructed prose). Rather, our goal must be flexibility in discourse use (Moffett, 1968)—the ability to enter into a breadth of textual interactions across the disciplines—and, moreover, a practical understanding of the cultural meanings and ideological complexities of writing.

Such a goal suggests, first, the potential pedagogical power of exploiting children's sensitivity to social context, particularly for supporting children's entry into a breadth of social dialogues mediated by text (i.e., a diversity of genres). There has been much discussion recently of the value of explicit attention to genre features and structures, particularly for older children from non-mainstream backgrounds (for an especially helpful discussion, see Bartolome, 1994). However, there has been much less attention to how such features and structures should be explicitly allowed for in early childhood curricula.

As Gray (1987) suggests, for young children, the sense of varied text structures may be dependent, not on explicit discussion of the structures themselves, but on the explicit embedding of those text structures, so to speak, within relevant interactional structures. Just as Kristin, Sammy, and his classmates first orally negotiated the social sense of detailed narratives within Author's Theater, so too teachers and children can negotiate the social sense—and, indeed, collaboratively construct the textual substance—of diverse genres. (Gray [1987] provides a very helpful example of this strategy; for an example of such pedagogy at work in Sammy's school, see Dyson, 1993, pp. 221-222.)

Second, paying heed to the ideological as well as the interactional dimension of writing would bring to the foreground "the central technical concerns" with which I began this article, these concerns that children construct a pluralistic world more successfully than have the adults before them. To this end, we might link writing pedagogy to critical pedagogy, that is, we might link learning to render relationships in print to learning to reimagine relationships, other ways of being in and with the world (Comber & O'Brien, 1993; Edelsky, 1991; Freire, 1970).

In Kristin's classroom, individual children's ways of writing were related to the interactive possibilities they saw for themselves in the micro-politics of a classroom where race, class, and gender were salient markers of difference. Kristin's children, like all children, must learn that *texts are not decontextualized*, that they are populated with images that reflect the historical, material, and ideological conditions of a particular time, and that those images can be questioned.

Many educators are, in fact, grappling with how instructional materials and practices might support or hinder "the number and quality of connections among our selves" (Genishi & Dyson, 1994, p. 237). For example, they are considering how the pedagogical emphasis on individual child "voice" might make invisible children's reproduction of gender, class, and race boundaries (e.g., Gilbert, 1994; Kamler, 1993; Levinsmire, 1993). And they are considering as well how literature and social studies texts might offer children worlds where all of their selves matter (Cai & Bishop, 1994). More broadly, concerns with a "new citizenship of pluralism" are basic to many current efforts to reform K-12 education (Hodegkinson, cited in Myers, 1994, p. 67).

To effectively link critical and writing pedagogy we must respect children's social worlds, without romanticizing or trivializing them. As early childhood educators have illustrated, the substance of critical pedagogy for young children comes—not from imposing adult concerns on children—but from taking seriously the issues of children's day-to-day living (e.g., Derman-Sparks, 1989), including their day-to-day playing, interacting, and, I would add, writing.

For Our Efforts to Write Ourselves ...

Finally, if we are to attend to children's critical literacy, we must also attend to our own. Indeed, there are many of us who are not comfortable with the implicit *we* of the literacy development literature and who, like Holly and Tina, offer alternative visions.

For example, scholars like Geneva Smitherman and Jerrie Cobb Scott argue for the literary power and learning potential of developed and culturally-rich rhetorical styles, and others, like Luis Moll, offer images of the rich relationships and "funds of knowledge" in households often viewed as experientially as well as economically "poor." Making sure that such work is not relegated to books and chapters on the "special needs" child, the obligatory "not-your-normal-child" section of language arts textbooks, is the responsibility of us all (Langer, 1988). Such work must be interwoven into new visions of "the child" and the craft of "teaching," visions that reflect the complexity of modern times and children's lives.

A dialogic perspective on development and on literacy portrays all language use, whether that of a child or an adult, whether oral or written, as entering into conversations with others. And it acknowledges the complexities of speaking and writing—of finding textual meeting ground—in a society in which power (i.e., the ability to take action and to influence that society) is not equitably distributed. Through acknowledging the complexities of our own writing lives, we may more readily envision them in our children's and, thus, guide and support their efforts to compose respected places for themselves in a truly pluralistic world.

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APPENDIX
SEX AND ETHNICITY OF SECOND GRADE CHILDREN

Sex	Ethnicity
FEMALE	
Holly	African American/European American
Johnetta	African American
LaShanda	African American
Lettrice	African American
Liliana*	European American
Lynn*	European American
Margaret*	European American
Makeda	African American
Melissa*	European American
Monique	African American
Rhonda	African American
Susan*	European American
Sarah*	European American
Tamara	European American
Tina	African American
MALE	
Aloyse	Ethiopian American (immigrant)
James	Korean American
Jonathan*	Chinese American/European American**
Kevin	European American
Lawrence	African American/European American
Michael	African American
Nyem	African American
Patrick	European American
Radha	Indian (Asian) American
Ricky	African American
Sammy	African American
Seth*	European American
Thomas	African American

*Children from homes in which at least one parent had a middle class, white-collar job.

**Jonathan was biracial. However, he looked Caucasian and his racial identity as Chinese did not seem salient to the children, unlike that of James and Radha, the other Asian American children. (For example, Melissa included James and Radha as potential leads for her Bruce Lee story because of "their hair." She did not consider blond Jonathan.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WRITING

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The National Center for the Study of Writing, one of the national educational research centers sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, is located at the Graduate School of Education at the University of California at Berkeley, with a site at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Center provides leadership to elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities as they work to improve the teaching and learning of writing. The Center supports an extensive program of educational research and development in which some of the country's top language and literacy experts work to discover how the teaching and learning of writing can be improved, from the early years of schooling through adulthood. The Center's four major objectives are: (1) to create useful theories for the teaching and learning of writing; (2) to understand more fully the connections between writing and learning; (3) to provide a national focal point for writing research; and (4) to disseminate its results to American educators, policy-makers, and the public. Through its ongoing relationship with the National Writing Project, a network of expert teachers coordinated through Berkeley's Graduate School of Education, the Center involves classroom teachers in helping to shape the Center's research agenda and in making use of findings from the research. Underlying the Center's research effort is the belief that research both must move into the classroom and come from it; thus, the Center supports "practice-sensitive research" for "research-sensitive practice."

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